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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks shows that she can be used as a model for students at many grade levels to emulate. Her poetry excels as a model, not only because of her imagery, but also because of her use and modification of both traditional and newer forms of poetry and her skill with the devices of sound. Like other evolving and maturing poets, she has increasingly come to use a less artificial and more independent voice and has thereby gained the possibility for a wider audience. Students in that audience can learn to appreciate the art of poetry by observing the work of Gwendolyn Brooks and imitating some of her patterns. (Examples of her work are discussed to illustrate how her poetry can be used in classrooms. A list of exercises based on Brooks' poetry and a selected bibliography are attached.) (R1)

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Gwendolyn Brooks: A Model in

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Most critics of Pulitzer prize-winning Gwendolyn Brooks bow reverently to her style just before they devote most of their energies to her development of theme.¹ However, in her interviews, Brooks balances the critics' emphasis on content with her own concern for poetic technique, with sound and form.² Following the poet's lead, then, let us learn more about her style in order to use her work to teach some of the elements of poetry, for Brooks is an especially fortunate model. First, she has excelled in a variety of forms during her career. Second, within those forms, she has experimented with and mastered the use of figurative language and sound devices such as rhyme and alliteration. Finally, the fact that she is modern, black, and female makes her a model still under-represented in our textbooks and classrooms. It is not that we should abandon the old and useful standbys of Pope, Tennyson, and Milton as exemplary in the craft of poetry. Instead, we need to add newer models representative of the diversity of our students and their worlds. If we continue, for instance, to illustrate onomatopoeia with Tennyson's "moan of doves in immemorial elms," we may simply reinforce the students' suspicions that the best poetry was written by only a few white

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men who (thank goodness!) died out sometime before the elms and rural life.

We will examine how, in teaching poetic technique, Brooks can be used in two ways:

- (1) by traditional definition and example: Here's what alliteration means, and here are examples, and
- (2) by the experience method: Here's how the poet used alliteration. Now students, engage in the word play that is poetry. Using the poet's pattern, in a group effort, write a line containing alliteration. Several exercises are included here for this purpose.³

When there is enough time and teacher patience, the student should get both approaches, of course, to assure that poetry and its nomenclature take root and grow.

Since both poetry in general and Brooks specifically require concentration, let us begin with forms closest to the student experience: ballads and songs. Of Brooks' many ballads such as "of Dewitt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery," "the ballad of chocolate Mabbie," and the "Ballad of Pearl May Lee," perhaps the "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" most easily exemplifies the usual ballad content of violence and betrayal and of display of physical courage, often by an ordinary person. It is the story of a quiet and strong black man who buys a home in a white neighborhood. He is then driven by his neighbors' brutality to an insanity that precipitates his own death. In style, the ballad illustrates the traditional reliance on repetition, simplicity of telling, and on the ABCB rhyme scheme. However, as with many other poems by Brooks, the stanzas do not scan

Ballads
and
Songs

very regularly.

The first stanza illustrates repetition through parallel clause patterns and shows the power of Brooks' compressed and surprising language:

Rudolph Reed was oaken.
His wife was oaken too.
And his two good girls and his good little man
Oakened as they grew.
(p. 360)⁴

Neologism
Connotation

The neologism "Oakened" startles but functions as an efficient verb. The name "Reed" connotes the perilous state of even a courageous man in a racist society.

Blues

Two other works are closer to song than "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed." In "of Dewitt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery," Brooks borrows a refrain from the spiritual "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" to celebrate the death of "nothing but a plain black boy" (p. 23). In "The Queen of the Blues," she copies a typical blues pattern, that of repeating the first thought before giving a response.

"I was good to my daddy.
Gave him all my dough
I say, I was good to my daddy,
I gave him all of my dough.
Scrubbed hard in them white folks' kitchens
Till my knees was rusty and so'"
(p. 42)

English
sonnet

Brooks blended the ballad with the sonnet to create what she called a "Sonnet-ballad." It follows, roughly, the English sonnet by its division into three quatrains and a couplet, but retains the content and tone of the ballad:

Modification
of
Form

Oh, Mother, Mother, where is happiness?
They took my lover's tallness off to war,
Left me lamenting. Now I cannot guess
What I can use an empty heart-cup for.
He won't be coming back here anymore.
Some day the war will end, but, oh, I knew
When he went walking grandly out that door
That my sweet love would have to be untrue.
Would have to be untrue. Would have to court
Coquettish death, whose impudent and strange
Possessive arms and beauty (of a sort)
Can make a hard man hesitate -- and change.
And he will be the one to stammer, "Yes."
Oh, Mother, Mother, where is happiness?
(p. 96)

While this work interests scholars because of her adaptation of an old form, its use for students lies in its ease of comprehension.

Italian
Sonnet

When Brooks often chose the sonnet for a vehicle in her early work, she usually followed the Italian model rather than the English.

Octave-
Sestet
Division

In one of her more readily understandable sonnets, "what shall I give my children? who are poor," she sets up a series of parallel descriptions in an octave of the typical ABBAABBA rhyme scheme:

What shall I give my children? who are poor,
Who are adjudged the leastwise of the land,
Who are my sweetest lepers, who demand
No velvet and no velvety velour;
But who have begged me for a brisk contour,
Crying that they are quasi, contraband
Because unfinished, graven by a hand
Less than angelic, admirable or sure.

Though not rhymed according to usual patterns, the sestet finds any immediate response by the poet inadequate to mitigate the suffering:

But I lack access to my proper stone.
And plentitude of plan shall not suffice
Nor grief nor love shall be enough alone
To ratify my little halves who bear
Across an autumn freezing everywhere.
(p. 100)

Poet and
Persona

Since the poet neither literally has poor children nor has been a political activist, this sonnet can be useful to point out the difference between poet and persona. In an even more obvious case of a mask, the speaker in "my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell" is a World War II soldier. Here, the soldier laments in the octave that he must store the good things of life during the hell of war. In the sestet he prays, despite the war's damage, that he can remain sensitive to life's worthwhile things after he returns:

I hold my honey and I store my bread
In little jars and cabinets of my will.
I label clearly, and each latch and lid
I bid, Be firm till I return from hell.
I am very hungry. I am incomplete.
And none can tell when I may dine again.
No man can give me any word but Wait,
The puny light. I keep my eyes pointed in;
Hoping that, when the devil days of my hurt
Drag out to their last dregs and I resume
On such legs as are left me, in such heart
As I can manage, remember to go home,
My taste will not have turned insensitive
To honey and bread old purity could love.

(p. 50)

Partial
Rhymes
Assonance
Consonance

The prosody of this sonnet is more subtle than the one on children. While it contains internal rhymes (lid/bid), most end rhymes are partial ones created by assonance (will/lid) and consonance (heart/hurt).

Alliteration

Both the sonnets on the war and children illustrate Brooks' often heavy use of alliteration:

And plentitude of plan shall not suffice
(p. 100)

.

When the devil days of my hurt
Drag out to their last dregs and I resume
On such legs as are left me, . . .

(p. 50)

Brooks' adoption of the traditional forms of sonnets and ballads has meant accepting and mastering the difficulty of rhyming in English. Indeed, she appears to have enjoyed playing with rhyme as much as Frost. In her earlier work she often wrote closed couplets such as the one from "the parents: people like our marriage: Maxie and Andrew:"

Closed
Couplets

Clogged and soft and sloppy eyes
Have lost the light that bites or terrifies.

There are no swans and swallows any more.
The people settled for chicken and shut the door.
(p. 70)

The second neat summary exemplifies the use of connotation by contrasting the ordinary and awkward chickens with the romantic swans and graceful swallows.

Connotation

Other close and multiple rhymes appear in the terza rima of "Kitchenette Building" and in the triple rhymes of several poems. Like Frost, who also tackled triple rhyme in many early poems, she often sounds artificial though her use of run-on lines relieves the sense of being pounded by rhyme:

Run-on
Lines

Chicken, she chided early, should not wait
Under the cranberries in after-sermon state
Who had been beaking about the yard of late.
(from "Sunday Chicken," p. 71)

.

What was not pleasant was the hush that coughed
When the Negro clown came on stage and doffed
His broken hat. The hush, first. Then the soft

Concatenation of delight and lift,
And loud. The decked dismissal of his gift.
The sugared hoot and hauteur. Then the rift
(from "Downtown Vaudeville," p. 73)

In the late sixties Brooks moved away from rhyme and rigid traditional forms though, like Eliot, she still scatters rhyme through free verse passages. This recent verse is more accessible. Its wider appeal has been, she contends, a conscious goal, for she says in recent interviews, that she wants people in taverns to appreciate her poetry.⁵ Reaching this larger audience requires a poetry nearer the speech of ordinary people. While the motivation for her new voice comes from an intensified black awareness that causes her to identify with all black people, she mirrors a pattern of maturation found in many other modern poets. Yeats, Lowell, Auden, and Eliot, among others, speak in a less artificial and contorted style in their later work.

Typical
pattern of
change to
less
artificiality

To draw the contrast between her earlier and recent work, let us look at two stanzas from the Anniad of the late forties and at a section from the "The Wall," composed almost twenty years later. The title, "The Anniad," alludes to the Aeneid, but in this case the struggle concerns the loss of love due to the damage of war and internalized racism. The following modified rime royal stanzas appear where she describes the coming of the war that will take away her lover, and, finally, destroy their relationship:

Doomer, though, crescendo - comes
Propheying hecatombs.
Surrealist and cynical.
Garrulous and guttural.
Spits upon the silver leaves.
Denigrates the dainty eves
Dear dexterity achieves.

Names him. Tames him. Takes him off.
Throws to columns row on row.
Where he makes the rifles cough,

Stutter. Where the reveille
 Is staccato majesty.
 Then to marches. Then to know
 The hunched hells across the sea.
 (pp. 85-86)

We immediately recognize power in this impressive, formal
 Diction verse. After reflection, we pause at a denseness and inaccessibility
 caused by the great separation of subjects and verbs and the level
 of diction ("hecatombs," "garrulous," and "surrealist.") In sound
 Onomatopoeia devices she succeeds in imitating the staccato of the guns (onoma-
 Poor topoeia). However, she strains too much for alliteration and thus
 Alliteration clouds the sense in "denigrates the dainty eves." The passage reminds
 us of the intense and sometimes wrenched language of Gerard Manly
 Hopkins.

On the other hand, "The Wall," though still very compressed
 through the use of imagery, is much simpler in diction and syntax.
 The following stanza sets the background of the poem which is about
 the dedication of a "mural communicating black dignity" and pride:

On Forty-third and Langley,
 black furnaces resent ancient
 legislatures
 of ploy and scruple and practical gelatin
 They keep the fever in,
 Fondle the fever.

All
 Worship the Wall.

(p. 415)

Metaphor The metaphors of furnaces and fever create an image of heat, a
 Imagery heat that must bring both sickness and possibly relief by melting
 the "Gelatin." Fire, then, serves the dual purposes of destruction

and purification. Here, Brooks' diction and imagery register somewhere between Hopkins and Carl Sandburg.

Many other passages, most from her later poetry, also exemplify imagery. Her famous description of the Blackstone rangers contains red and black visual images and tactile imagery in "raw and "sores":

Imagery

There they are.
Thirty at the corner.
Black, raw, ready.
Sores that do not want to heal.
(p. 416)

Conclusion

Brooks excels as a model, not only in imagery, but also in her use and modification of both traditional and newer forms and in her skill with devices of sound. Like other evolving and maturing poets, she has increasingly come to use a less artificial and more independent voice and has thereby gained the possibility for a wider audience. Students in that audience can learn to appreciate the art of poetry by observing her work and imitating some of her patterns. In fact, by engaging in the word play that is poetry, some students just might be inspired to become more independent poetic voices on their own.

EXERCISES --- GENERAL DIRECTIONS

The following exercises are arranged from easy to difficult within each numbered heading. The exercises have been tested with a variety of grade and reading levels.⁶ Students in groups of 3-4 worked on them within fifty-minute class periods.

Recommended procedures for introducing exercises include:

- (1) Teach the example poem, defining words, stating themes, and calling attention to poetic technique.
- (2) Concentrate on a definition of one term, e.g., alliteration, before doing an exercise so that the experience of the exercise makes the abstract definition concrete.
- (3) Give students a start by . . .
 - . . . completing an exercise yourself or with help from the whole class.
 - . . . sharing examples done in another class. A confident class or one of higher ability can provide examples to motivate other classes.
 - . . . suggesting the subject. The cafeteria food will generally produce good, humorous lines. A recent or upcoming school event or the day's national news can also provide subjects.
- (4) While some students will be immediately ready to do exercises by themselves, most students will be less intimidated and have more fun if they attempt them initially in groups of 3-4. In setting up groups, try to break cliques and to see that each group contains students of varying ability and confidence levels.
- (5) Students should have their own copies of the model poem and the exercise.
- (6) Allow 7-10 minutes of class time for a one or two line exercise, 20-30 minutes for stanzas.

Discussion after any exercise can focus on the relationship of form to meaning, using questions such as the following:

DISCUSSION

- (1) IN WHAT WAY DID HAVING A FORM TO FOLLOW MAKE THE ASSIGNMENT DIFFICULT?
- (2) IN WHAT WAY DID IT HELP YOU?
- (3) MANY POETS HAVE COMPARED THE SKILL OF WRITING POETRY TO THAT OF BEING A GOOD ATHLETE. WHAT SIMILARITIES DO YOU SEE?
- (4) DID YOU FIND IT DIFFICULT TO WRITE ON A SERIOUS SUBJECT WITHOUT SOUNDING CORNY OR UNINTENTIONALLY HUMOROUS? EXPLAIN.
- (5) WHAT HAPPENS TO A THOUGHT WHEN YOU MUST TRY TO SAY IT IN A VERY DETAILED FORM (TRIPLE RHYME, FOR EXAMPLE)? CAN YOU SAY EXACTLY WHAT YOU HAD PLANNED TO SAY? WHY OR WHY NOT?

I. BALLADS

MODEL:

RUDOLPH REED WAS OAKEN.
 HIS WIFE WAS OAKEN TOO.
 AND HIS TWO GOOD GIRLS AND HIS GOOD LITTLE MAN
 OAKENED AS THEY GREW.

FILL IN THE FOLLOWING BLANKS WITH WORDS DIFFERENT FROM THOSE
 IN THE POEM BY BROOKS. FOLLOW THE PATTERN OF THE POEM AS CLOSELY
 AS POSSIBLE. FOR EXAMPLE, THE POET HAS USED "OAKEN" AND TURNED
 IT INTO A VERB IN THE LAST LINE. IF YOU CHOOSE "STEEL" AS A SUB-
 STITUTE FOR "OAKEN," YOU WILL WANT TO MAKE THE VERB IN THE LAST
 LINE "STEELED."

- A. (NAME) _____ WAS (DESCRIPTIVE WORD) _____
 HIS WIFE WAS (SAME DESCRIPTION AS FIRST LINE) _____
 AND HIS TWO (DESCRIPTIVE WORD) GIRLS AND HIS (TWO DESCRIPTIVE
 WORDS) MAN
 (MAKE A VERB OF THE FIRST DESCRIPTIVE WORD) _____ AS THEY GREW.

IF YOU FINISH BEFORE OTHER GROUPS, MAKE THE LAST NAME OF
 THE HERO SUGGEST THAT HE WILL PROBABLY LOSE IN HIS STRUGGLE.

- B. CHOOSE ANOTHER STANZA FROM "THE BALLAD OF RUDOLPH REED,"
 AND, WITH DIFFERENT WORDS, FOLLOW ITS PATTERN.
- C. CHOOSE A WOMAN YOU ADMIRE. SHE MAY BE AN OUTSTANDING
 PERSON IN THE NATION OR IN YOUR COMMUNITY. WRITE A
 BALLAD STANZA, RHYMING IT ABCB, PRAISING HER.

II. STRUCTURE OF THE ITALIAN SONNET

THE FIRST 8 LINES OF AN ITALIAN SONNET USUALLY CONTAIN A PROBLEM, QUESTION, OR DESCRIPTION. THE LAST 6 LINES COMMENT UPON OR ANSWER THE FIRST 8. WHILE THE SONNET IS A 14-LINE POEM, YOU WILL BE ASKED TO WRITE ONLY A 6 LINE POEM THAT HAS THE SAME BREAK IN THOUGHT.

DECIDE ON A PROBLEM WE FACE AS A NATION OR ONE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE FACE.

IN THE FIRST FOUR LINES, DESCRIBE THE PROBLEM OR ASK A QUESTION ABOUT IT.

IN THE LAST TWO LINES, GIVE SOME SOLUTION OR COMMENT.

USE AN ABBADD RHYME SCHEME.

MODEL

WHAT SHALL I GIVE MY CHILDREN? WHO ARE POOR,
WHO ARE ADJUDGED THE LEASTWISE OF THE LAND,
WHO ARE MY SWEETEST LEPERS, WHO DEMAND
NO VELVET AND NO VELVETY VELOUR;
BUT WHO HAVE BEGGED ME FOR A BRISK CONTOUR,
CRYING THAT THEY ARE QUASI, CONTRABAND
BECAUSE UNFINISHED, GRAVEN BY A HAND
LESS THAN ANGELIC, ADMIRABLE OR SURE.
MY HAND IS STUFFED WITH MODE, DESIGN, DEVICE.
BUT I LACK ACCESS TO MY PROPER STONE.
AND PLENTITUDE OF PLAN SHALL NOT SUFFICE
NOR GRIEF NOR LOVE SHALL BE ENOUGH ALONE
TO RATIFY MY LITTLE HALVES WHO BEAR
ACROSS AN AUTUMN FREEZING EVERYWHERE.

III. ALLITERATION

- A. USING BROOKS' "AND PLENTITUDE OF PLAN SHALL NOT SUFFICE" AS A PATTERN, INSERT DIFFERENT WORDS THAT ALLITERATE IN THE BLANKS BELOW.

AND (NOUN) OF (NOUN) SHALL NOT SUFFICE

- B. TRY WITH FOUR WORDS NOW, USING TWO DIFFERENT CONSONANTS.

AND (NOUN) OF (NOUN) (CAN/SHALL/WILL/MUST)

NOT (VERB)

IV. CONNOTATION - COUPLET

A. USE AS A MODEL:

THERE ARE NO SWANS AND SWALLOWS ANY MORE,
THE PEOPLE SETTLED FOR CHICKEN AND SHUT THE DOOR.

REPLACE BROOKS' WORDS IN THE BLANKS BELOW.
CHOOSE WORDS THAT CONNOTE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE
IDEAL AND THE EVERY DAY LIKE "SWANS" AND "CHICKENS."

THERE ARE NO _____ AND _____ ANYMORE
PEOPLE SETTLED FOR _____ AND SHUT THE DOOR.

B. WRITE TWO RHYMING LINES EXPRESSING ANY CHANGE FROM
PAST TO PRESENT. USE RHYMES DIFFERENT FROM THOSE
BY BROOKS.

V. MULTIPLE RHYMES.

MODEL

SUNDAY CHICKEN

CHICKEN, SHE CHIDED EARLY, SHOULD NOT WAIT
 UNDER THE CRANBERRIES IN AFTER-SERMON STATE.
 WHO HAD BEEN BEAKING ABOUT THE YARD OF LATE.

A
 A
 A

ELITE AMONG THE SPECKLE-GRAY, WILD WHITE
 ON BLUNDERING MOSAIC IN THE NIGHT.
 OR LOVELY BAFFLE-BROWN. IT WAS NOT RIGHT.

B
 B
 B

YOU COULD NOT HATE THE CANNIBAL THEY WROTE
 OF, WITH THE NOSTRIL BONE-THRUST, WHO COULD DOTE
 ON BOILED OR ROASTED FELLOW THIGH AND THROAT.

C
 C
 C

NOR HATE THE HANDSOME TIGER, CALL HIM DEVIL
 TO MAN-FEAST, MANIFESTING SUNDAY EVIL.

D
 D

A. MAKE A LIST OF WORDS THAT RHYME WITH "LIGHT."

DESCRIBE A RECENT EVENT IN THREE LINES. USE THREE WORDS
 FROM YOUR LIST FOR RHYMES.

B. DECIDE ON A SUBJECT. WRITE THREE LINES, ALL OF WHICH
 RHYME WITH EACH OTHER. DO NOT USE "LIGHT" FOR A RHYME.

VI. IMAGERY, METAPHOR

MODEL:

THE BLACKSTONE RANGERS (AS SEEN BY DISCIPLINES)

THERE THEY ARE.
 THIRTY AT THE CORNER.
 BLACK, RAW, READY.
 SORES IN THE CITY.
 THAT DO NOT WANT TO HEAL.

CHOOSE A GROUP TO DESCRIBE (CHEERLEADERS, SOCCER PLAYERS, TEACHERS, ETC.). DESCRIBE THEM, USING AT LEAST ONE METAPHOR SUCH AS "SORES". FOR THE "AS SEEN BY" LINE, CHOOSE THE VIEWERS WHO DESCRIBE YOUR GROUP (PARENTS, STUDENTS, POLITICIANS, ETC.).

(AS SEEN BY _____)

THERE THEY ARE.

(NUMBER) _____ (AT/ON/IN/BY) THE (PLACE) _____.

_____, _____, _____. (USE THREE DESCRIPTIVE WORDS)

(METAPHOR) _____ IN THE (PLACE) _____.

THAT (DO/DO NOT) WANT TO _____.

Endnotes

¹ A survey of the 19 scholarly articles on Brooks indexed in MLA since her first book shows only three with style as their primary focus: Gloria T. Hull's "A Note on the Poetic Technique of Gwendolyn Brooks," CLA, 19 (1975), 280-85; D. H. Melhem's "The Heroic Voice of Prophecy," Studies in Black Literature, I, No. 1 (1977), 1-3; and Craig Werner's "Gwendolyn Brooks: Tradition in Black and White," Minority Voices, I, No. 2 (1977), 27-38.

² For using patterns created by poets as a teaching technique, I am indebted to a talk given by Stephen Dunning for the April 1979 meeting of the South Carolina Council of Teachers of English.

³ See Gloria T. Hull and Posey Gallager, "Update on Part One: An interview with Gwendolyn Brooks," CLA, 21 (1977), 19-40; George Stavros, "An Interview with Gwendolyn Brooks," Contemporary Literature, 11 (1970), 1-20.

⁴ The World of Gwendolyn Brooks (New York: Harper & Row). All references in my text to Brooks' poetry will be to this edition which is the most comprehensive volume.

⁵ Hull and Gallager, p. 20.

⁶ I am grateful to Lynn Harrill, Chair of Woodruff High School English Department and part-time teacher at the University of South Carolina, Spartanburg, for suggestions on this paper and these exercises. I am especially appreciative of his testing of many of these exercises with his high school students.

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